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SUBJECT: Rio de Janeiro Sets Up Municipal Election Task Force to Counter Voter Intimidation in Slums

¶1. Summary. In advance of the October municipal elections, a new trend has emerged involving the use of intimidation to organize and deliver massive voter blocks from favela communities to candidates willing to align themselves with drug traffickers and militias. The Brazilian Federal Police, together with the Rio state government, has set up an election task force to monitor the situation more closely. End Summary.

¶2. The Brazilian Federal Police are investigating widespread reports that drug traffickers and militias (off-duty law enforcement officers turned community mob bosses) in the state of Rio de Janeiro are intimidating members of the communities they control to sell large voting blocks to candidates for the October municipal elections. Under Brazilian law, this practice is considered illegal. However, the practice of voter intimidation is nothing new in Rio, according to political scientist Jairo Nicolau.

¶3. Nicolau, a Professor at the University Research Institute (IUPERJ), told the Consulate that voter intimidation has been widespread in Brazil, but on a small scale. In previous campaigns, candidates have been previously prohibited from entering favelas as part of their campaigns for that very reason. The new trend, says Nicolau, is that drug traffickers and militias are taking a much more active role to organize and sell "blocks" of voters - basically conducting a public auction for their support, or in some cases launching their own candidates for lower level offices such as city council.

¶3. In large favela communities, drug traffickers and/or militias act as a parallel government. They control access into the favelas and dictate the activities that go on within them. On July 26, for example, drug traffickers allowed mayoral candidate Marcelo Crivella to enter their community for a campaign event. However, they did not allow the accompanying press to photograph or film the event. This episode of press censorship is considered by many observers as evidence of a deteriorating democratic process in Rio. On other occasions, various mayoral candidates have complained that drug traffickers and militias are denying their entry into communities thereby limiting their ability to interact with voters.

¶4. On July 29, Rio de Janeiro created a joint task force to guarantee public safety and electoral integrity during the October's municipal elections. Approved by President of the Regional Electoral Court (TRE) Roberto Wider, Rio State Secretary for Public Security Jose Beltrame and Federal Police Chief Jacinto Caetano, the task force involves the Civil, Military and Federal Police. Rio Governor Sergio Cabral lauded the task force as a successful partnership between the state and federal governments. He further admitted that the situation in Rio de Janeiro may require that the task force remain in place after the municipal elections.

¶5. Comment. Favela communities could account for more than one-quarter of the voting public in Rio's municipal elections. As such, candidates, drug dealers and militias all know that support from these communities is valuable. It remains to be seen how effective the new electoral task force will be, or if organized voter intimidation spreads to other areas of Brazil where there are large, concentrated communities of the urban poor. End comment.

Martinez